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Gilmore, Joseph Henry.
Thanksgiving Sermon.
Fisherville, N. H.
1863





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"Hath God forgotten to be Gracious."

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THANKSGIVING SERMON,

PREACHED BEFORE

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THE UNITED RELIGIOUS SOCIETIES

OF

FISHERVILLE, N. H.,

Nov. 26, 1863,

BY J. H. GILMORE,

Pastor of the Baptist Church.

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DISCOURSE.

“HATH GOD FORGOTTEN TO BE GRACIOUS?”—Ps. 77: 9.

The psalmist, in putting the question of my text, did not dream that any one would seriously answer it in the affirmative. In the very next verse he reproves himself for having even dared to hint that God had “in anger shut up his tender mercies.” Whenever, in the centuries which have rolled away since this psalm was written, unblushing infidelity has ventured the assertion that our Father had “forgotten to be gracious,” the prompt and emphatic denial of the church, the solemn and impressive silence of the world have borne witness to his mercy and love. In our own land especially the recognition of God’s goodness has from time immemorial been spontaneous and hearty. But a change has come over the spirit of the Christian world. It is no uncommon thing now, when the rulers of our State or Nation set apart a day for solemn thanksgiving to Almighty God, to hear his professed children even, more than insinuate that we have very little to be thankful for. So many utterances of this nature have grated upon my ears that I have thought I might render an acceptable service to these united congregations by suggesting some proofs that God has not “forgotten to be gracious” to our country during the past year.

Before I enter on my theme, let me say that no man feels more keenly than I the bitterness and the gloom of this terrible struggle in which the nation is involved. It is a fearful thing to see brother arrayed against brother in deadly strife; to think of the empty seats by the fire-side on this festive day; to

summon up the wasted forms of those who, in the hospital, or amid the horrors of a Southern prison, sigh for the cool, fresh breezes of their New England home. Oh! yes, civil war is a great and terrible evil; but there are greater evils than civil war. The thunder-storm which darkens the summer sky and hurls its forked terrors on our defenceless heads is a terrific scourge. But the thunder-storm is not so deadly as the steady, dry, oppressive heat which flees before it. It was a terrible scene when the demon which Christ cast out threw his poor victim foaming and screaming to the ground and tore him in his rage before he left him. But what should we think of him who would let the sufferer live and die in the clutches of Satan rather than see him suffer thus severely? And what of him who pities the poor demon, compelled to loose his hold on his victim, more than the *man* released from thralldom?

What heart can fail to be oppressed with sadness while the gloomy, gigantic shadow of Death, stealing onward to new scenes of carnage, falls athwart our fair land — while the martial tramp of the tens of thousands who are marching down into the dark valley, sounds in our ears? Yet, if we are the children of the Highest, groping through the darkness, we can touch God's hand and feel that all is well. It may be better with us as a people to-day — despite all our sacrifices and sufferings — than ever before in our national history. We know not into what newness of life God has purposed that we shall rise from our baptism of blood.

“ God works no otherwise. No mighty birth
But comes by throes of mortal agony;
No man-child among nations of the earth
But findeth baptism in a stormy sea.”

Unquestionably “ clouds and darkness are round about him ;” but it is equally beyond all question that “ righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne.” And righteousness and judgment ever bring peace and joy in their train. If I can point you to-day to any evidence that God has not “ forgotten to be gracious ” to our country — that he has not “ cast off forever ; ” may we not hope that in his sovereign purposes He

is more merciful than we in our weakness can understand? We can see plainly enough that judgment is tempered with mercy in his dealings with this people. May it not be that, in the counsels of infinite wisdom, judgment is mercy and every trial but a blessing in disguise? May we not soon discern in the dark spot which for a few hours dims the brightness of the sunshine and saddens our fair land by its baleful eclipse, the full-orbed moon riding clear and serene in the unclouded heavens?

Let us remember that in this world we must not hope for unmingled good. "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth." In heaven only is there perfect freedom from sorrow, because there only do we cease from sin. Yet even in the fiery furnace of our affliction how often can the eye of faith discern a form like that of the Son of Man. God, during the past year, has thrown the pall of death oftener than ever before over this little village. Again and again has He entered our households and taken from us those who were dearer than life itself. But how sweetly has the morning-star of consolation beamed forth from the night of gloom! How blessed the thought that more have passed from death unto life among us during the twelve-month than they who have passed from life unto death. As we recall the wonderful displays of God's saving power; as we think of the ransomed ones who have gone from us to keep their thanksgiving in the presence of God; dare we say — we who have been afflicted even — that God has not blessed us in the year that is gone? Shall the husbandman as he surveys his bursting barns, the laborer as he receives wages such as were never told out to him before, the tradesman as he wonders at a prosperity such as no other people has ever known in time of war — murmur at God's dealings with us? Shall we complain because the clear, bright sunshine has been flecked with clouds; because the sky has been overcast; because the rain even has poured down upon us, with such proofs that back of drifting cloud and driving rain the sun still shines as glorious as ever?

But I already weary your patience. Let me, as I promised,

point you to some indications that God has not "forgotten to be gracious" to our country during the year that is past. In this service I propose to use plain words and call things by their right names.

I. I mention first THE CONTINUED AND HEARTY RESPONSE WHICH THE PEOPLE OF THE NORTH HAVE MADE TO THE CLAIMS OF THEIR GOVERNMENT. When this great rebellion first broke out, when the Southern chivalry, a hundred to one, assailed the worn and starving garrison of Fort Sumter, we were amazed at the readiness with which the freemen of the North, forgetting their local prejudices and political preferences, sprang to arms to avenge the insult offered to the dear old flag. We felt that none but God could have thus fused the varying and discordant masses of the North into the molten lava of a fervent patriotism. The Uprising of the North will be cited by the historian of distant ages as a token of God's presence in our national history. And is God's presence less clearly seen in that wonderful unanimity with which the people of the free States, after three years of untold hardships, have shown at the ballot-box that they are still loyal? Every inducement which man could devise to bend them from their purpose was tried. Hope deferred had made the heart sick. Almost every household in the land mourned some loved one lost in this great struggle. Twelve hundred thousand of the noblest of our sons had already been sent into the field. Twelve hundred millions of dollars had been expended. Fresh calls for men and means hung over the country. The war had assumed an aspect which no man at the outset dared to anticipate. And yet by majorities which must be counted by tens of thousands, the people of the North have buried the peace party in dishonorable graves — to await the second resurrection. For almost the first time in our national history does the President of the United States find himself sustained by a popular majority during his entire term of office. I do not misinterpret the voice of the people. I do not think they thought much about party politics in the late elections. The simple question with them was: War or a dis-

honorable peace. I do not understand them to say that the man who fills the presidential chair is perfect, that he is their first choice even for that high and sacred position. But they have said in tones of thunder which echoed from the wild Atlantic to the far Pacific that they will stand by him to the last man and the last dollar. In their simplicity they have not been able to discriminate between the Government and its constituted authorities. They have been willing to overlook grave blunders, serious faults that they might set the seal of their approval to sincere purpose and honest endeavor. God only could have wrought them to this matchless patriotism.

An evidence still more striking of the popular devotion (and of His power who turneth even the king's heart "whithersoever he will") is found in the alacrity with which the North has responded to the pecuniary demands of its Government. When men's pockets are emptied into the national treasury, when patriotism gets into Wall street then you may be sure that the heart of the people beats sound and true. What have we seen during the past year? Three hundred and thirty millions of government bonds taken at par by our own people in six months. Search the pages of history in vain for a similar example of confident devotion. But, you say, this immense debt will bankrupt the nation. Is England bankrupt? Her debt to-day is four times that of the Northern States, while her resources are vastly inferior to our own. A national debt, held not by foreign capitalists but by the people of a nation is not a curse but a blessing. It is a bond of indissoluble union. Louis Napoleon understood that when, in the first flush of his popularity, he called not on the bankers of Europe but on the people of France for the millions which he needed. Every man who responded to that call has given bonds for the security of the imperial throne. So long as the interest on his money is promptly paid and without excessive taxation, he will not venture his all in any rash, revolutionary scheme. So it is in our own case. You will not find men and women with "Five-twenties" in their pockets plotting treason or voting for a man who

"Left his country for his country's good."

God, in stirring up the hearts of rich and poor alike to pour their savings into the coffers of government has bound them by the strongest ties to stand by the country to the very last.

But, you say, this immense debt will never be paid. I do not believe it. The day will come when every Government bond, every tattered green-back, every greasy bit of postal currency will command its full value in gold. Till then we have in our debt not only a new bond of union, but a new and safe and needed field for the investment of our earnings. And what if our currency should depreciate until like that of the Revolution it is utterly worthless? The loss would be far less, considering our numbers and our resources, than that which our Fathers bore. They bore it cheerfully, though Tories croaked then as traitors croak now. It was a part of the price which they paid for freedom. Shall we be less willing than they to make sacrifices and endure hardships for our country? Our Country! Ah, back of all forms and parchments and men rises her dear and sacred image to be loved and guarded like the memory of the mother at whose knee we lisped our childish prayers. Shall we prostitute her to ignoble treason for paltry gold? God forbid.

II. Again, I can see evidences of Divine favor in THE CONTINUED SUCCESS OF THE NATIONAL ARMS. Those who expected to over-run the South with 75,000 three months' men may be excused for still mourning the poor success of our armies. But, my friends, from the first hour of the rebellion to the present time the eagles of the Republic have steadily pressed onward towards the goal which now rises clear and distinct before us. We have met with reverses. We should have expected them. Taking us even by surprise, we have shown ourselves equal to the emergency. The doubt and despair which one year ago seemed to be settling upon us have given way to a steady determination which knows no defeat. The victorious banners of our loyal hosts press month by month closer to the scene of their final triumph. Within the twelve-month past the *last* rebel invasion has been met and its leader,

smarting beneath the loss of well-nigh 50,000 men, driven back beneath the very walls of his starving capital. The Mississippi has been opened to commerce from its source to its mouth. The heart of the Southern Confederacy has been pierced at Chattanooga. Help has been borne to the oppressed loyalists of Tennessee. The banks of the Rio Grande have trembled beneath the tread of a loyal army. Before the very cradle of the rebellion we have met with such success as renders the fate of that doomed city (to borrow the language of "The Thunderer") only a question of time. The *New York Herald* estimates the territory of the Southern Confederacy at the outbreak of this rebellion at 838,206 square miles. Six months ago three-fourths of its fair proportions had been shorn from it, leaving only 238,000 miles subject to rebel control; and its losses in battle for a single year were estimated by the same authority — none too favorable to the loyal cause — at 100,000 men. The *Richmond Enquirer* asks in dismay: "What nation ever before in three years of war lowered its flag eleven times in surrender?" And the same sheet waxing merry over its miseries tells us that in Richmond they carry their money to market in a basket and bring their meat home in their pocket-books. I take the terrible sufferings of our soldiers in the Libby prison as an evidence of the straits to which our "paper blockade" has reduced the masses of the South. Nor do I pity the Southern people any more than I pity the lost soul who might have salvation for the asking. Is it not evident on which side the power of God is enlisted in this terrible struggle? Shall we despair of success with such names as Gettysburg, Vicksburg and Port Hudson freshly inscribed upon our banners?

And as if this were not enough, as if God would honor our National festival with fresh tokens of his favor — even while I speak the lightnings of heaven are bearing us tidings of new and yet more glorious victories. The paper which I hold in my hand (this morning's *Journal*,) brings the official intelligence that Lookout Mountain is ours with more than 6000 rebel prisoners and 50 pieces of cannon and Bragg's army in

disorderly retreat before our victorious forces. "Unto thee, O God, do we give thanks; unto thee do we give thanks, for that thy name is near thy wonderful works declare."

III. Let me point again as evidence of the divine favor to THE IMPROVED ASPECT OF OUR FOREIGN RELATIONS. A year ago war with England and France seemed inevitable. But the British Lion has learned now to "roar as gently as a sucking dove;" and the Gallic Fox, much as he loves fat poultry, stands in deadly awe of the farmer's cudgel. And both British Lion and Gallic Fox look with some little distrust on the Russian Bear who proposes for once to hibernate in our hospitable ports. England and France at the outbreak of the rebellion underrated our National strength. They felt that they might safely interfere to crush this rising power which dared to dispute their supremacy among the nations. They expected the great Republic to topple to pieces in a night. Hence their horrible alacrity to recognize as belligerents those pirates who plunder and burn on the trackless ocean. What has changed their feelings toward us? The fact that our iron-clad fleet surpasses in numbers and efficiency (I quote again from the *London Times*,) all similar squadrons of the world combined. The fact that we are to succeed in our endeavors to maintain the integrity of the Union, for the rulers of the old World fall down and worship Success. The fact that the momentous issues of this terrible conflict have come to be understood abroad. The hearts of the people are with us in our struggle; and kings and emperors dare not resist the impulsive sympathy of the masses which surge around their thrones. We have taught the old world something in this year of grace 1863. The seizure of the Confederate rams, the prompt disclosure of the projected Canadian invasion bear evidence to that. We have saved ourselves, by one sharp, quick, energetic effort from years of foreign complication and strife. It will be a long day before Old Europe will seek occasion to lay hands on Young America.

IV. And we ourselves have learned as well as taught others.

I count it as not the least of the blessings which flow from these terrible struggles that we have come to have A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHARACTER AND POWERS OF OUR GOVERNMENT. So mild had been the rule of the general government, so few the symbols of its power that we hardly knew we were a nation rather than a community of States. But a government which can levy taxes, enforce conscriptions, put down insurrections and carry to a successful issue civil war — has shown that it is a power and not a mere name. And our government has not only shown its power but it has gained in power since the war began. The people of the West and the East, the North and the South have come to better understand each other's character. The people of the loyal States have learned that their interests are identical — that if "one member suffer, all the members suffer with it." One year ago, when the Ninth Army Corps went into the department of the West they were greeted with the cry "We don't want you Yankees here. We can fight our own battles." But that feeling has passed away. It was knocked out of our Western brethren before Vicksburg and Port Hudson.

On God's anvil and

"By his great hammer, blow on blow,"

we are fast being welded into one people. The work is not accomplished yet; but in God's good time it will be. Yes, the day will come when loyalist and rebel will be mentioned only in history — when Northerner and Southerner shall be merged in the more glorious name of American — when one united people, faithful to each other because true to God, shall fill each smiling valley and cluster on the towering slopes of every hill from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

God has done all this for other nations. England, 200 years ago, was convulsed by civil war. For three years the best blood of her children was poured out like water. The contest was brought home to every man's door — nay, into many a family. Such battle-fields as Naseby and Marston Moor — such scenes as the execution of King Charles attest the fierceness of the struggle. But to-day England is a

united and happy people. The names of Cavalier and Round-head are forgotten. The fierce thunder-storm has passed away and left the gentle hush of balmy summer. Thus may it be — thus will it be with our own loved land.

V. Lastly, I can but see evidence that God has not “forgotten to be gracious” to this people in THE FACT THAT HE IS FAST RIDDING OUR LAND OF THAT GIGANTIC EVIL WHICH HAS BEEN THE FRUITFUL CAUSE OF ALL OUR MISERIES. We did not contemplate this glorious result when the rebellion burst upon us. We thought only of a constitution trampled in the dust, a solemn union causelessly broken, a flag insulted, a nation of freemen wronged. But God “remembered those in bonds as bound with them.” He has compelled us as a means for the maintenance of “The Union, the Constitution and the Enforcement of the Laws” to utter the righteous word which lets the oppressed go free. In his Providence, mailed treason has freed us from those constitutional obligations which forbade us to interfere with the peculiar institutions of the sovereign States. Disaster and defeat have compelled us to seize the golden opportunity and “proclaim liberty throughout the land to all the inhabitants thereof.” God has cut loose the millstone which was weighing this nation down. We have no longer reason (I borrow the words of Thomas Jefferson) to “tremble for our country when we remember that God is just.” We have had evidence of the truth which that great statesman uttered that “God has no attribute which can take sides with the advocates of slavery in such a contest” as that in which we are now involved.

My friends, we have always agreed in regard to the nature and influence of this terrible evil. The most heartless conservative has prayed that God “in his own time and his own way” would banish it from our midst. God has taken us at our word. At a time when we thought not, in a way that we little dreamed He has compelled us to “do unto others as we would have others do to us.” He has given efficacy to the words which our rulers have spoken. The Emancipation

Proclamation is not, as many expected, a dead letter. There are one million freedmen in our land to-day. They stand side by side with your own sons in our armies. You sit here in peace to-day because 200 negro soldiers garrison the forts at the mouth of the Piscataqua. These men have shown that they were worthy to be free. Recall that colored standard-bearer whose breast was torn open by a bursting shell in the deadly assault on Wagner. Passing the banner of his country — yes, thank God! his country — to his comrades he cried: "Take her, boys, she hain't touched the ground yet." That standard did not touch the ground. Is it not cause of thanksgiving that God has raised up men with black faces even to take the place of men with blacker hearts who cower and turn pale before the tidings of a union victory? Is there one Christian here who does not acquiesce in the will of God towards our down-trodden brethren, who does not rejoice that the poor slave can clasp the Bible to his heart and give account of himself to the Almighty? I hope not.

In conclusion, let me urge upon you two practical duties. First, let us be swift to recognize God's hand in our national history. He is constraining us to do so. This war has raised up for us no great leaders. It has given us, as yet, no presidents. The Revolutionary War gave us Washington; the War of 1812, Jackson; our Indian troubles, Harrison; the Mexican War, Taylor and Scott and Pierce. But what general to-day has even the ghost of a chance to fill the Presidential chair? God is taking all the glory to himself. The Lord of Hosts is our leader and in his name do we set up our banners. O! how often has he interfered to save us when the arm of man grew faint. How many scenes are recorded in our national history like that when the little Monitor steamed into the mouth of the Potomac and went forth, like David against Goliath to do instant battle against the haughty monster which prostituted to ignoble treason the name of our noble river. Lest we should worship that vessel, she lies fathom-deep at the bottom of the sea. But Jehovah still lives. "The Lord is a man of war. The Lord is

his name." Shall we not cry aloud, in reverent submission to His will, "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us; but to thy name give glory."

Once more, and very briefly, let us be true to our Country in this hour of her peril. Let us be careful that we do not, by act or word or thought even, weaken the hands of those brave men who stand between us and the foe. Let us beware of yielding to despondency when reverses come upon us. Let us turn a deaf ear to the demon of captious criticism. Let us subordinate the claims of self and party to the more sacred demands of the Fatherland. Never yet was nation engaged in a holier cause than ours. An impious and causeless rebellion, a rebellion which, to borrow the words of the Vice President of the Southern Confederacy, "is the height of madness, folly and wickedness," assails the best government which the world has ever known. Inscribed upon the banners which we have unfurled in its defence is the glorious legend: "Liberty and Union — now and forever — one and inseparable." In such a struggle we must succeed. Every attribute of the Almighty is pledged to the triumph of our arms. Each moon that waxes and wanes brings fresh tokens that he has not "forgotten to be gracious." Trusting in his strength, let us go forward conquering and to conquer.

"O! countrymen, God's day is not yet done,
He leaveth not his people utterly,
Count it a covenant that he leads us on,
Beneath the cloud and through the crimson sea."

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